

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI  
EASTERN DIVISION**

ACCESS DISABILITY, LLC,	)	
	)	
Plaintiff,	)	
	)	
v.	)	Case No.
	)	
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION,	)	
	)	
Defendant.	)	

**COMPLAINT FOR DECLARATORY AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF**

COMES NOW Plaintiff, by counsel, and for this cause of action states:

**Jurisdiction and Venue**

1. This is an action under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552, to compel the production of records concerning Plaintiff's clients' scheduled hearings before Defendant's Administrative Law Judges ("ALJs") pursuant to Plaintiff's clients' Requests for Hearing following administrative claim denials.
2. Jurisdiction is conferred upon this Court by 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B).
3. Plaintiff is a law firm and has been registered with the State of Missouri under charter LC0855016 as a limited liability corporation since 1997. Plaintiff's principal place of business is located in St. Louis County, at 1285 Fern Ridge Parkway, Suite 120, St. Louis, Missouri 63141.
4. This action is brought in the judicial district in which Plaintiff maintains its principal place of business and venue is proper in this Eastern Division of the Eastern District of Missouri.

### **Parties**

5. Defendant is the Social Security Administration and as such has full power and responsibility for administration of the Social Security Act and Regulations.
6. Defendant is in possession of the records requested by Plaintiff.
7. Defendant was the recipient of Plaintiff's request for records under FOIA.
8. Plaintiff is the requester of the withheld records, by and through counsel.

### **Facts**

#### **Background**

9. Defendant has scheduled Plaintiff's attorneys and clients for hearings to be held before unnamed ALJs in St. Louis and Creve Coeur, Missouri. Defendant has provided written notices of the hearings. For each notice, in the section following "Sincerely" that would normally provide the name of the assigned ALJ, the Notice provides only a blank space, followed by "Social Security Administration." A true and accurate copy of a representative Notice of Hearing is attached as Plaintiff's Exhibit A.

10. Hearings to be held before an ALJ involve the review of otherwise private medical records, and those records are not viewed by judges other than the ALJ assigned by Defendant to the claim at the time.

11. At the level of these claims (the ALJ hearing), no more than one ALJ is assigned to a claim at one time, although the assignment of an ALJ can change under limited circumstances such as illness.

12. When the Notice of Hearing is issued, a single ALJ has been assigned to the claim by Defendant, and it is that ALJ who sets the time and place for the hearing.

13. For more than twenty years—until December 2011—Defendant routinely provided claimants and their representatives with a Notice of Hearing that included the last name of the judge who was expected to conduct the scheduled hearing.

14. Upon information and belief—in December 2011—Defendant instructed ALJ hearing offices to conceal the name of the judge from the claimant and claimant’s representative until the day of the hearing (“Defendant’s Secret ALJ Policy”).

15. Upon information and belief, Defendant’s Secret ALJ Policy was communicated orally by an internal telephone conference, without the participation of or notice to the general public.

16. Upon information and belief, Defendant’s Secret ALJ Policy is not described in any written or online publication available to the general public.

17. Defendant continues to publish (and has not published notice of intent to withdraw) regulations that Plaintiff cannot comply with under Defendant’s Secret ALJ Policy, including:

20 C.F.R. § 416.1435—“Each party shall make every effort to be sure that all material evidence is received by the administrative law judge or is available at the time and place set for the hearing.”

20 C.F.R. § 416.1436(a)—“The administrative law judge sets the time and place for the hearing. He or she may change the time and place, if it is necessary. After sending you reasonable notice of the proposed action, the administrative law judge may ...”

20 C.F.R. § 416.1436(d)—“If you object to the time or place of your hearing, you must notify the administrative law judge at the earliest possible opportunity before the time set for the hearing.”

20 C.F.R. § 416.1439—“If you object to the issues to be decided upon at the hearing, you must notify the administrative law judge in writing at the earliest possible opportunity before the time set for the hearing.”

20 C.F.R. § 416.1440—“An administrative law judge shall not conduct a hearing if he or she is prejudiced or partial with respect to any party or has an interest in the matter pending for decision. If you object to the administrative law judge who will conduct the hearing, you must notify the administrative law judge at your earliest opportunity.”

18. In accord with the published regulations, Defendant’s website continues to inform the general public that, if a hearing is scheduled before an ALJ, the claimant will have a need to communicate directly with the assigned ALJ pre-hearing. For example, <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/ssi/text-appeals-ussi.htm> provides the following direction to Supplemental Security Income claimants who have a hearing scheduled before an ALJ:

If for any reason you cannot make it, **contact the judge as soon as possible before the hearing** and explain why. If you do not attend the scheduled hearing, you may lose your appeal rights and benefits.

We may pay you for travel costs if the distance to the hearing from your home is more than 75 miles one way. If you need money for travel costs, **tell the judge as soon as possible before the hearing.**

...

The judge may ask other witnesses, such as medical experts to come to the hearing. **You may ask the judge to order certain witnesses to attend the hearing.**

#### FOIA Request

19. On or before November 28, 2012, Plaintiff, by and through counsel, submitted to Defendant FOIA requests in the manner described below, requesting a record that would identify the last name of the judges assigned to conduct hearings on Plaintiff’s cases as of the date the report is produced.

20. Plaintiff, by and through counsel, mailed the FOIA request letters to the Hearing Office Directors of the hearings offices in question. True and accurate copies of the letters are attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibits B and C.

21. Plaintiff, by and through counsel, mailed the same FOIA request letters to the “SSA Office of Privacy and Disclosure,” 617 Altmeyer Building, 6401 Security Blvd., Baltimore, MD 21235.

22. Defendant maintains a website intended for use by the general public and claimants—[www.socialsecurity.gov](http://www.socialsecurity.gov).

23. By publication on Defendant’s website, Defendant encourages the submission of FOIA requests by mail to the address used by Plaintiff for submission of the FOIA request letter.

24. Plaintiff’s request was for the last names of the ALJs assigned to conduct Plaintiff’s hearings and for the written policy under which the identity of the assigned judges was omitted from the Notices of Hearing and concealed until the hearing.

25. By notice dated December 6, 2012, Defendant acknowledged receipt of Plaintiff’s FOIA requests, assigning them reference number S9H: AI9421. A true and accurate copy of the notice issued by Dawn S. Wiggins, Freedom of Information Officer for Defendant, is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit D.

26. Defendant is in possession of multiple records, any of which would enable Defendant to satisfy Plaintiff’s FOIA request for the identities of the assigned ALJs.

27. Defendant could fully satisfy Plaintiff’s FOIA request in less than five minutes and with less than five pages.

28. More than thirty-five business days have passed since Defendant’s acknowledged receipt of Plaintiff’s requests by Defendant’s Freedom of Information Officer, and Defendant has not provided a response to Plaintiff other than acknowledgement of receipt.

29. The time limits have passed for Defendant’s response as provided in 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A).

30. Defendant's Secret ALJ Policy limits Plaintiff's ability to prepare for the scheduled disability hearing because Defendant's ALJ's have differing expectations for pre-hearing contact in the form of written briefs and notice regarding the status of the evidentiary record.

31. Defendant's Secret ALJ Policy limits Plaintiff's ability to prepare for the scheduled disability hearing and avoid delay because Plaintiff cannot determine if there is a conflict with the individual ALJ until the day of the hearing.

32. Defendant's Secret ALJ Policy limits Plaintiff's ability to prepare for the scheduled disability hearing and avoid delay because Defendant's ALJ's have different requirements for the submission of medical records and other evidence. For example, some of Defendant's ALJs require the submission of all available pages in the record of a hospitalization, while other ALJs require the submission of only discharge summaries and key objective findings. For another example, some of Defendant's ALJs require the submission of online database reports of a claimant's litigation history, while other ALJs expect counsel to avoid the submission of evidence that predates the alleged onset date of disability.

33. Defendant's Secret ALJ Policy limits Plaintiff's ability to prepare for the scheduled disability hearing and avoid delay because Defendant's ALJs conduct hearings in very different ways and Plaintiff will be much less prepared for the hearing without advance knowledge of the name of the judge and an opportunity to consult with counsel. For example, some of Defendant's ALJs ask most of the questions of the claimant, while other ALJs expect counsel to ask most of the questions. For another example, some of Defendant's ALJs encourage consultation with counsel during the hearing, while other ALJs forbid it. For another example, some of Defendant's ALJs routinely conduct a hearing for more than an hour, while

other ALJs expect the hearing to last half as long. For another example, some of Defendant's ALJs permit counsel to ask a vocational expert to refer to an exhibit in the medical record and opine as to its vocational implications if it were credited, while other ALJs forbid such questioning.

34. Defendant has improperly withheld the record sought.

35. Defendant's failure to comply with Plaintiff's FOIA requests has been arbitrary and capricious.

36. Plaintiff has exhausted administrative remedies.

### **Claim**

I. Plaintiff has a statutory right to the record sought, and there is no legal basis for Defendant's refusal to disclose them.

### **Prayer for Relief**

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff requests that this Court:

1. Declare that Defendant's refusal to disclose the record requested by Plaintiff is unlawful;
2. Order Defendant to make the requested record available to Plaintiff;
3. Enjoin Defendant from relying on an invalid practice in all future FOIA requests filed by those with scheduled ALJ hearings, who are seeking a record of the last name of the ALJ;
4. Declare Defendant's actions to be violative of FOIA;
5. Make specific findings of fact regarding Defendant's arbitrary and capricious violation of FOIA, and refer the matter to Special Counsel and/or the Merit Systems Protection Board for investigation as provided in 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(F);

6. Award Plaintiff costs and reasonable attorney's fees in this action as provided by 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(E); and

7. Grant such other and further relief as the Court deems just and proper.

Respectfully submitted,

By: /s/ David D. Camp  
David D. Camp E.D.#46278MO  
1285 Fern Ridge Pkwy., Suite 120  
St. Louis, Missouri 63141  
(314) 450-4700 (telephone)  
(314) 450-4707 (facsimile)  
*Attorney for Plaintiff*